

Section 3.

'Giving up' reading: re-imagining reading with young adult readers

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Background

In this article I explore the thoughts and reflections of young adults from the Black Country in the West Midlands about what it means to read and to be a reader. Beginning with discussions of newspaper reading I suggest that whilst the participants in this study were likely to feel comfortable with their 'technical skills' as readers they were not always so confident in their abilities to 'grasp', as they saw it, the 'correct' meanings of the texts they read, most especially those they encountered in the course of their studies at college. Drawing on data collected in relation to 'reading for pleasure' I begin to consider the ways in which new media textualities, in this case gaming, may offer young adults new ways of *being* as readers that although both pleasurable and motivating find little legitimate expression within educational spaces. I make use of Gee's notions of active and critical learning to suggest that if the reading subject identities constructed through schooled literacy are to be meaningful (valued) and useful (permit learners to exercise power as readers perhaps even in ways that are not predictable or, we *must* dare to say, desirable) to young adult readers then a broader range of theoretical understandings must be brought to bear on practice. These seem pertinent in the environment of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2007) and Media 2.0 (McDougall, 2007; Gauntlett 2008) which seems at once to offer both exciting new possibilities for young people to *enact* reading (and writing) and to further trouble the possibility of a proximal relationship between educational and cultural life world literacy identities. I go on to consider what might usefully be learnt about reading by beginning to theorise the enjoyment young adults find in out of college textual experience. The findings of this article may

be of interest to those involved in the teaching of reading as they illustrate compellingly the need for pedagogical approaches to reading and literacy that not only take serious account of the social practices through which readers experience text but which rigorously theorise the making and taking of meaning and in so doing teach learners to "really read" (Gee, 2003: 16).

Introducing the data

This article draws on excerpts of data from a study of the reading habits and identities of sixteen to nineteen year olds studying in further education contexts in the Black Country, West Midlands. Data collected for the study included a large scale reading habits questionnaire, focus group discussions and auto-ethnographic reading histories from individuals. It is from the focus group discussions that the extracts cited here are drawn.

These groups comprised of between three and five participants, twenty-three participants in total, following programmes of study at QCF (Qualifications and Credit Framework, formerly National Qualifications framework) levels one, two or three. Participation was voluntary and participants and groups were self-selecting. The gender make-up of groups was varied, some were all male, some all female and some mixed. However no groups were mixed by level of study. The discussions took place in informal, quiet spaces away from the classroom setting and were semi-structured. Participants were asked to respond to twenty one stimulus questions or statements, related to the findings of the region wide reading habits survey, which they turned over at their own pace 'pack of cards' style. I led the discussions and although I had previously been a teacher at